

Sermon for Evening Prayer
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinityⁱ

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons: ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. ⁱⁱⁱ

“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase: all that devour him shall offend; evil shall come upon them, saith [SETH] the LORD. Hear ye the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel:

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal [BAY-ull], and walked after things that do not profit.

“Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith [SETH] the LORD, and with your children’s children will I plead. ... For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith [SETH] he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith [SETH] unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Homily:

The Second Lesson for today is a rather complex passage that contains several lessons for us to learn. I’m not going to try to develop

all of them, but I would like to mention some of them before focusing on one in particular.

Unfortunately, that means I'll be jumping around a little instead of following a straight path of logic as I usually do. I realize that will make this sermon hard to follow, and you may just stop listening at some point and mull over in your mind something I have just mentioned while I'm going on to other things. I will forgive you for doing that if you will forgive me for making it necessary.

The first thing I would like to call your attention to is the symbolism of the feast that the king is giving to celebrate the marriage of his son. This is clearly a reference to the Messianic banquet, which in the book of Revelation is called "the marriage feast of the lamb". It is an image of the end times, the day when Christ comes to claim His bride, which is the Church in classical Christian imagery.

Those of us in liturgically oriented churches look upon the Sacrament of Holy Communion as a prefiguring and anticipation of that great banquet. In that day, Christ and His Church will be made one. But that cannot happen until the Church has given herself completely to her Master as a bride submits herself completely to her husband on their wedding day.

If there are any feminists among you I will simply note that Christ has already offered Himself completely to His bride and awaits our response.

As the parable notes, there are those in the Church who have not really given themselves to the Lord. They are busy with other things. And that is the reason for the instructions given by the king to his servants. The instructions are to bring people in no matter what kind of people they are. The result is a mixed bag.

Some people in the Church are sincere, some are not; some are honorable, some are not; but it is not our job to make those distinctions. God will sort us all out at the end of time. That's clear from other parables as well: the dragnet full of fish, some edible and some not; the wheat and the weeds; the sheep and the goats; and in this parable, the

fact that the king himself comes in to inspect the guests and decides in at least one case that somebody has to go. Most ancient commentators say that the one guest who was expelled actually represents a whole class of people who came in as they were but remained as they were instead of putting on the proper attire. I'll come back to that in a moment.

Some of the other references in the parable are to the Jews who did not accept their invitation to the marriage feast of the Lamb. They did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah or as the Son of God and they made light of His claims. Some of them went so far as to kill the Apostles who were sent to them. The first Christian martyrs were killed, not by the Romans, but by their fellow Jews.

The Gospel was offered first to the Jews, and only after they rejected it was it offered to us Gentiles. That is why Jesus sent His Apostles on their first mission trip with instructions to go only the House of Israel. That is also why St. Paul made it a point whenever he entered a city to go to the synagogues first and preach there before going to the public forum and preaching to the Gentiles.

And just one more thing before I return to the man who was thrown out of the king's feast. The burning of the city and the slaughter that accompanied it are references to what the Roman army did to Jerusalem in 70 A.D. in retaliation for a Jewish uprising against Roman rule. That was not the first time God used a pagan army to punish His unfaithful people, and it may not be the last. It happened with the Assyrians. It happened with the Babylonians. And it could happen in our day with the Muslims, who, while they are not pagans, could well be used as instruments in God's hands to punish us in what was once the Christian West for our rebellion against Him.

I'm sorry to lay all that material on you in such abbreviated form, but that's what the parable does, and I just couldn't resist pointing out some of those references. But now I would like to concentrate on just one of the features of this story: the man without a wedding garment.

St. Augustine and some of the other ancient preachers interpret the wedding garment as a symbol of love. This, they say, is what marks a man as acceptable, that is, to be suitable to stand in the presence of God.

There is good Biblical precedent for such an interpretation. In I Corinthians, Chapter 13, St. Paul talks about love as the one thing that is indispensable for Christian character. But in the Book of Revelation we have the scene of a great multitude, clothed in white robes, standing before the Lamb and the throne of God. They are those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, or in other words, they have repented and changed their ways.

The change of clothes, or at least the washing of them, is symbolic of a change in the way people live, and that is what God expects of everyone who comes into the Church. You are not expected to be pure and holy when you come in, but you are expected to become that way. The process of transformation is hardly complete for most of us, even for the best of us, but we are expected to be a work in progress and not simply unrepentant, self-willed, and self-centered. By ignoring the need to change our ways, we insult the God who has graciously invited us to share in the consummation of His work of redemption.

There is some dispute about whether or not the host of a wedding party would customarily provide his guests with a special garment. But there is no dispute about the fact that God provides everyone with the grace and the power to become a new person, if that person is willing to be so transformed. And that's where the Judgment comes in.

If you are not willing to allow God to remake you into the image of His Son – if you are not willing to repent and submit yourself to His transforming power – if you think you're good enough the way you are and refuse to have your character, your behavior, your soul made white by the blood of the Lamb, then you can expect to be bound hand and foot so that you can't cause any more trouble, and to have your mouth shut so that you can no longer speak in the Church, and to be expelled from the presence of God into the outer darkness, which is to say, away from Him who is the source of all light and of all life.

And yet, in the parable, the king calls this man "friend". God calls you "friend" as well, even if you are one of those who refuses to have your character washed. Even if you find the choices you make exclude you from the presence of God and from the marriage feast of the Lamb, God still loves you. There is nothing you can do that will make Him

stop loving you. But you can insult Him and you do insult Him if you come into His Church and refuse to allow Him to cleanse your character of every blemish, to remove every vice, and to make you worthy of uniting with His Son.

So the question I leave you with is not whether you have arrived at a state of perfection or are worthy of your place at the Lord's table. The answer to that question is easy. You have not. Nor have I. Nor has anyone here.

The important question is whether you are moving in the right direction, or even moving at all. If the answer to that question is "No", then there is only one thing to do. Get out of your smug satisfaction with yourself and get moving in the right direction. That is what the scriptures call "repentance", and repentance is what is required of all who come to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

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St. Joseph's Mission
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ⁱ "Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening." *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 2:1-9, 13 (KJV)*.

^{iv} *St. Matthew 22:1-14 (KJV)*.

^v *St. Matthew 22:14 (RSV)*.